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Housekeepers' Chat

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Cotton Frocks for Spring." Prepared by Ruth O'Brien, in charge of the Division of Clothing and Textiles. Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. D. A.

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"If I had as much money as I could spend" I'd have all the cotton frocks I want this spring. A printed suiting for Monday, a printed pique for Tuesday, a flower-sprigged lawn for Wednesday, broadcloth for Thursday, printed dimity for Friday, gingham for Saturday, and for Sunday--what would I have for Sunday? A dress made of one of those sheer, highly mercerized cottons that are new this season.

As an extra dress, for street, I might have a smart ensemble--a costume made with a heavy cotton material for the coat, and a sheer cotton material for the dress. For parties, I'd have one pale green organdy, one primrose yellow organdy, one pink, one--but that would really be too much, even for a person who is extremely fond of organdy party frocks.

You see I've been looking at cotton dressgoods this week; never before have I seen such beautiful selections in cotton materials.

A friend of mine in the Bureau of Home Economics, Miss Ruth O'Brien, has written a talk, called "Picking Cottons on the Retail Counter." Today I'm going to read you this talk, which was prepared especially for broadcasting. Now you may forget about Aunt Sammy, and imagine Miss O'Brien is broadcasting:

PICKING COTTONS ON THE RETAIL COUNTER

They tell us this is to be a cotton season, and that we will all be buying cotton dresses this spring. Perhaps that all-powerful but mysterious "they" who are supposed to dictate what milady wears, may not really know. However, those of us who have learned the comfort and convenience of cotton for summer wear will be only too glad to follow the suggestion.

Fashion books are talking of cotton sport dresses, cotton house dresses, cotton for street wear, and even cotton dance frocks. New and lovely fabric designs are promised us, and the ready-to-wear manufacturers are planning to contribute their bit. We are told that medium-priced, and well-made cotton designs will be available this summer, suitable for business, office, or street

wear. This is welcome news. In past seasons, many of us have gone hopefully to our favorite store, and come away disappointed, because only very ordinary designs were available in cotton yardage, and the ready-made dresses were either of the housedress or the over-elaborate type.

This suggests some of the points that should always be kept in mind in buying cottons, as well as other fabrics. I sometimes think suitability is the one thing which should be stressed over and over again. Don't you often feel that way when you see all the party frocks and shoes that are starting off to work these days? It seems so hard for women to realise that an outfit which may be stunning at a tea party, is anything but that in the kitchen or in an office.

Now my idea of a good looking, cotton dress is one that is made of material suitable for the occasion on which it is to be worn. Organdies make lovely party frocks, but not office or house dresses. Gingham is an ideal material for house wear, and may even be used for street dresses, if the proper colors and designs are selected. But my idea of a fish out of water is a gingham bathing suit. Yet we see such things suggested in the fashion magazines.

Then I like to see that common sense has gone into the making of the dress and the fabric. We all know that one of the best things about cotton is that it will wash. Yet we see cotton dresses with satin bands and other frail trimmings, that could not possibly be tubbed. Only a trip to the cleaners will refresh such a dress, and cotton does not dry clean satisfactorily. Many a mother spends hours making ruffles and other complicated trimmings on her daughters' dresses, only to find she has turned out nothing really beautiful, and has merely added to the hours she must spend at the ironing board. It is well to remember that good color, line, and proportion make beauty. Elaborateness usually defeats its own object.

Sometimes we see cotton fabrics so loosely woven, or so poorly dyed, that they will not wear or wash well. It always pays to examine any fabric carefully before buying it. Pull it between your hands, and note whether or not the yarns slip. Ravel out some of these, and break them. A weak yarn usually means a weak fabric. Take a sample home and wash it, to see how fast the color is, and whether it is so filled with sizing that it is sleazy and has no body after this is washed out. There are excellent American-made cottons always available, dyed with fast American-made dyes. We need only to use a little care in making our purchases. Unfortunately, we do not yet have in this country a system whereby fabrics are labelled according to their quality. If this were done, we could make our selections much more intelligently, as far as qualities are concerned.

Recently one association of fabric finishers started a system of labelling all fabrics, which have passed certain tests for color fastness. Their label is the word Nafal on an acorn-shaped background. This association guarantees that any fabric so labelled has been tested for color fastness, by an impartial testing laboratory, and has come up to certain standards. This is a sincere effort to help the consumer, and to protect honest manufacturers from those who have been advertising cotton materials as color fast when they are not.

The choosing of attractive and artistic colors and designs will always be a personal matter. Of course, none of us will admit we do not have good taste. Yet we see women about us whose costumes are so much more distinctive than ours, that we wonder how they knew just what to buy. May I suggest, that a mistake often made in buying cottons is to choose a fabric on which realistic flowers or other objects are dotted over a white surface. This is very seldom a successful choice. Realistic designs are rarely artistic, and never as suitable for fabrics as conventional ones. A background softly tinted with neutral tones blends in with almost any design better than a white one, and is also more becoming to the wearer.

Think of the pattern which you have chosen for the dress. The fabric design must harmonize with this. For example, a striped material made into a dress with scallops and other curved lines would produce a hectic effect. Again, a fabric design made up of outstanding units is generally very difficult to handle. These units may be out of proportion to the size of the person who is to wear the dress, and it is difficult to cut it so that the units do not give queer effects. The other day a woman passed me on the street wearing a dress cut so that a large design of the material appeared on her chest. She looked like a warrior of old with his breast plate.

Drape the fabric you are considering on a rack on the counter, and stand back where you can view it from a distance. Very few people scrutinize our garments in detail. They see us as we walk into a room or down the street. The impression they receive includes the design of the fabric in its relation to the lines and proportions of the dress, and, in fact, to the whole costume.

It may seem rather a waste of time, to give all this thought merely to buying a cotton dress. But, after all, no purchase is a success unless we buy with it satisfaction.

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This concludes Miss O'Brien's talk on "Picking Cottons on the Retail Counter." Perhaps she will prepare another talk for us during National Sewing Week, which comes in April.

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Tomorrow: "Proper Care of Bathroom Fixtures." Program includes menu and recipe.

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